

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Whitehead and Liminality

### Book Section

#### How to cite:

Stenner, Paul (2018). Whitehead and Liminality. In: Stenner, Paul and Weber, Michel eds. Orpheus' Glance. Selected papers on process psychology: The Fontarèches meetings, 2002–2017. Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgique: Les Editions Chromatika, pp. 213–228.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 Author



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.i6doc.com/nl/book/?GCOI=28001100840010#h2tabtableContents>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](https://oro.open.ac.uk)

Stenner, P. (in press) Whitehead and Liminality. In Stenner, P. and Weber, M. (in press for 2018) (eds) Orpheus' Glance. Selected papers on process psychology: The Fontarèches meetings, 2002–2017, pp.213-228. Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgique: Les Editions Chromatika.

## **Whitehead and liminality**

Paul Stenner

(paul.stenner@open.ac.uk)

Open University, UK

Although he did not use the term, Whitehead's philosophy of organism arguably provides us with a way of thinking *liminality* in an ontological way. This ontological liminality helps to make sense of the specifically anthropological account of liminality provided by the process anthropology of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Although it is crucial, this is not simply a matter of the importance Whitehead's philosophy gives to the concept of process. For Whitehead, finitude, in its most general sense, is a species of *limitation*. From its partial perspective, each finite actual occasion implicates the whole of reality within itself such that 'each event signifies the whole structure' (Whitehead, 1922, p.26). This means that no event is inherently isolated. It is Whitehead's philosophy of limitation that provides the basis for an ontological liminality consistent with the way that concept is understood within the social sciences.

### **Introduction**

'Mankind became artists in ritual.' (Whitehead (1926, p.21). This profound statement has been all but ignored. And yet, for a philosopher who considers creativity (or the principle of novelty, or 'the production of novel togetherness'), to be 'the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact' (Whitehead, 1929, p.21), we should not ignore this suggestion that the human species *became artists* and did so *in ritual*. Whitehead surely intends both meanings: that our capacity for the arts arose from our involvement in ritual, and that we perfected ritual into something like an art form. Writing as a social psychologist, I find in this combined proposition an exciting potential for unraveling some of the implications of Whitehead's thought for the social sciences, and for an inherently historical and cultural understanding of human

psychology. This, in turn, might open new means for integrating psychosocial science with natural science and the humanities. Such integration at the level of cosmology is, of course, Whitehead's chief preoccupation. In his analysis of rites of passage, Arnold van Gennep (1909, p. 194) also points in this direction when he discovers within these rituals 'a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe'.

Building on my applications of Whitehead's philosophy within social psychology (Stenner, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018, Stenner and Moreno, 2013, Greco and Stenner, 2017), this paper explores just one aspect of the problem: namely, how process thought provides us with a way of thinking about *the liminal* – a concept introduced by van Gennep – in an ontological manner. This can be useful for psychologists, not least because a concern with liminality leads us to think about the nature of actual occasions of experience, and, indeed, about the different ways in which experiences can be occasioned, especially the notion of liminal experience. The advantage of an ontological concept of liminality is that it promises relevance beyond the anthropological situation of human experience, and lodges the notion of 'liminal experience' within a broader processual account of nature and the cosmos. In broadening the concept beyond anthropology, it should nevertheless accommodate the anthropological use in which the occasions of experience in question are occasioned by forms of social and cultural activity mediated by communication (and presupposing more or less conscious human actors). All kinds of psychological phenomena can then be illuminated as experiences of liminality.

### **Whitehead's philosophy as a philosophy of limitation**

It must be remembered that Whitehead is a metaphysician and so deploys terms in unfamiliar ways that are maximally general. Liminality is not in fact a term that he uses, but he does describe his philosophy as a philosophy of *limitation*: 'I use the term "limitation" for the most general conception of finitude' (Whitehead (1922, p.16). This is because, for Whitehead, finitude in its most general sense is a species of *limitation*. From its partial perspective, each and every finite actual occasion that 'happens' in the universe implicates the whole of reality within itself such that 'each event signifies the whole structure' (Whitehead, 1922, p.26). This means that no event

is inherently isolated, and yet each event is what it is (as a finite entity) on account of its limits.

The concept of finitude implies that of infinity, and hence something finite is a limitation with respect to the infinite. Instead of infinity (and, indeed, the related but distinct concept of 'totality'), Whitehead prefers the word *factuality* to express the inexhaustibleness of all that is and all that is becoming in the universe. If factuality is unlimited, then any given 'factor' we encounter can be grasped as a limitation of factuality. A factor qua limitation is something carved out of factuality or *canalized* within factuality. Importantly, this means that 'limitation' is not just a negative concept, but has positive content. A living organism, or a conscious experience, is a limited factor within factuality in the sense that it *is* a specific canalization of the wider physical universe. This is what allows Whitehead to 'get rid of the notion of consciousness as a little box with some things inside it' (Whitehead, 1922, p.17). A philosophy of limitations thus escapes the bifurcation into inner and outer that has plagued psychology since its inception: 'the abstract is a limitation within the concrete, the entity is a limitation within totality, the factor is a limitation within fact' (Whitehead, 1922, p.16).

This perspective abolishes any notion of nature as an aggregate of self-contained entities, each isolatable from, and independent of, the others, and hence each 'event signifies the whole structure' (Whitehead, 1922, p.26). This is why the notion of an isolated event (a simple occurrence in a simple location) is a contradiction in terms. Any finite entity is part of a broader factuality, but it can participate more fully in that factuality, and perhaps even grasp the nature of its participation, only by overstepping the limits that made it what it was. Limitation, for Whitehead, never refers to a fixed boundary, but to something more like a threshold of transformation. Whitehead (1929, p.327) is clear, for example, that the first meaning of the word 'process' is the 'expansion of the universe with respect to actual things'. The basic atoms of the universe (the 'actual entities' or 'actual occasions') are not unchanging substances but *fluences* that emerge as concrete only through their own internal process of concrescence, through which 'prehensions' they selectively feel the broader factuality of the universe to which their concrescence contributes.

A philosophy of limitation might thus be said to consider each and every entity as situated 'betwixt and between' a finite limit and limitless infinity. It is in this sense that a concept of liminality shows itself as a *transformation of the limits* that form any given factor in the universe. Liminality is the passage from finite form to finite form, but in this passage between forms of finitude an entity is also exposed to the formless infinity beyond itself. We might say, to shift vocabulary, that the pristine individuated forms proper to Apollo thus encounter Dionysian transformation. Whitehead's philosophy of limitation is thus revealed as a liminal philosophy since it is less concerned with the finite forms *as such* than with their transformation, the passage of their *movements* and their *relations* to the infinite totality. The ontological scope of this mode of thought makes it applicable even to molecules, although molecules - whose capacity for transformation is relatively trivial - remain incapable of punctuating their limit-crossing passages with ritual:

Consider one definite molecule. It is part of nature. It has moved about for millions of years. Perhaps it started from a distant nebula. It enters the body; it may be as a factor in some edible vegetable; or it passes into the lungs as part of the air. At what exact point as it enters the mouth, or as it is absorbed through the skin, is it part of the body? At what exact moment, later on, does it cease to be part of the body? Exactness is out of the question. It is only to be obtained by some trivial convention. (Whitehead, 1938, p. 21)

When dealing with the 'betwixt and between' of such molecular occasions of passage, exactness is out of the question. In the following quotation, which deals with the anthropological level, however, Whitehead shows himself to be particularly interested in those more 'dramatic' liminal occasions during which forms of process go through rapid and profound transformations, because the usual limits are swept away:

Nothing is more interesting to watch than the emotional disturbance produced by any unusual disturbance of the forms of process. The slow drift is accepted. But when for human experience quick changes arrive, human nature passes into hysteria. For example, gales, thunderstorms, earthquakes, revolutions in social habits, violent illnesses, destructive fires, battles, are all occasions of special excitement. There are perfectly good reasons for this energetic reaction to quick change. My point is the exhibition of our emotional reactions to the

dominance of lawful order, and to the breakdown of such order. When fundamental change arrives, sometimes heaven dawns, sometimes hell yawns open (Whitehead, 1938, p. 95).

### **Anthropological liminality**

It was Victor Turner who first proposed an approach called *process anthropology*, also called *the anthropology of experience* (Turner and Bruner, 1986). There is no evidence that he was directly influenced by Whitehead's philosophy, and I suspect that he did not have a significant reading experience of Whitehead. The obvious inspirations within his process approach are Dilthey, Dewey and Schutz, and in his essay *Process, system, and symbol: a new anthropological synthesis* he also discusses Sally Falk Moore's legal anthropology of process (Turner, 1977). Both Schutz and Moore certainly were influenced by Whitehead, and so it is possible that Turner absorbed Whitehead only indirectly.

Regardless of the nature of the influence, Turner articulated a process approach to anthropology that is in many ways very consistent with the philosophy of organism. He wrote of an intellectual shift 'from a stress on concepts such as structure, equilibrium, function, system to process, indeterminacy, reflexivity – from a *being* to a *becoming* vocabulary' (Turner, 1977, p.61). Turner nevertheless reminded his readers that: 'It has sometimes been forgotten by those caught up in the first enthusiasm for processualism that process is intimately bound up with structure and that an adequate analysis of social life necessitates a rigorous consideration of the relation between them' (Turner, 1977, p.65).

It was in this intellectual context – which complements a broadly Whiteheadian approach to psychosocial science grounded in concepts of process and relationality - that Turner made the concept of liminality famous. The term 'liminality' derives from the Latin word 'limen' meaning 'threshold' (*Schwelle*, *seuil*). The outer limits (*Schranke*, *frontier*, *marge*) of the Roman empire, for instance, were marked by fortifications known as 'limes'. As Thomassen (2009) points out, there is thus a clear *spatial* meaning in which liminality refers to borderlands, thresholds or other in-between spaces whether these be thresholds between rooms in a house, thresholds between houses in a street, zones between streets, borders between states, or even wider geographical areas. This spatial meaning makes the concept relevant to sciences

like geography and archaeology, as when Pryor (2004, p.173) describes the causewayed enclosures of prehistoric Britain in relation to the 'special status of physical liminality': burial areas are liminal with respect to living areas, for instance. Liminality entails much more than this observable *spatial* meaning of a border between states or a threshold between rooms. It also conveys the less tangible *temporal* sense of something that happens: an occurrence, event or phase. As Thomassen (2009) suggests, this temporal dimension is also remarkably fluid, varying from moments (the liminality of sudden events like earthquakes or road accidents) to periods (the liminality of a summer holiday or the French revolution) to entire epochs (the 'axial age' or the Renaissance). The concept of the liminal did not begin with Turner, and nor did the idea of a processual anthropology. Turner discovered both in the anthropology of Arnold van Gennep who introduced the liminal in his book 'Rites of passage' from 1909. It is telling that Turner (1977, p.66) referred to van Gennep as 'the first scholar who perceived that the processual form of ritual epitomized the general experience in traditional society that social life was a sequence of movements in space-time, involving a series of changes in pragmatic activity and a succession of transitions in state and status for individuals and culturally recognized groups and categories'.

### *Van Gennep's Rites de Passage*

Van Gennep (1909) first introduced the concept of rites of passage. He showed that they were pervasive throughout all the cultures that had been studied by anthropologists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and are characterised by a specific pattern. *Rites of passage* are rituals or ceremonies associated with significant turning points in the life of a society and in the lives of individuals. Their purpose is *transformative* in that they function to prepare, enact and commemorate transitions from one state or status to another, or between one world of 'pragmatic activity' and another. Rites of passage are many and varied. For example, van Gennep first discusses what he calls the 'territorial passage' where the crossing of frontiers of various kinds is accompanied by ceremonial rites. He goes on to describe rites associated with pregnancy, childbirth and childhood, before discussing initiation rites, ceremonies of betrothal and marriage and funerals. These are not entirely distinct from territorial rites, since in many societies a change in state, status or social position

will be accompanied by a territorial change in dwelling place, and hence a literal territorial passage will also be involved. Other relevant ceremonies include those rites which ‘accompany and bring about the change of the year, the season, or the month’, and, as van Gennep points out, these are also related to notions of birth, death and rebirth.

In sum, whether territorial rites, seasonal (or other temporal) rites, life stage rites, or rites associated with changes of office, rituals of passage mark circumstances of transformation or *becoming*. Van Gennep’s chief contribution was his identification of a three-fold *pattern of the rites of passage*. This pattern has three phases which he called pre-liminal, liminal and postliminal. Each is a necessary stage in a process of becoming or transformation:

- First there are rites of **separation** in which the previous state or social position is, as it were, broken down. These ceremonies often involve symbols of cutting or incision, as when a boy is circumcised or hair is cut during the separation phase of an initiation rite.
- Then there is a middle **transition** phase of passage, which might often involve a trial or test that must be successfully completed. The symbolism here is often of movement, as when a bride is carried across a threshold or an initiate must make a dangerous leap from a high structure.
- The passage then ends with the rites of **incorporation** during which the new status, position or identity is established and recognized. Here a wedding ring or crown may symbolize the unity of a new bond, as might the tying of fabrics or the knotting of belts.

Van Gennep used the word ‘liminal’ to refer to the middle, transitional phase of this pattern. What is distinctive about this middle phase is that during it the usual limits imposed by the rules and norms of social structure have been temporarily removed. This suspension of the usual order of things is symbolized by the preliminal rites of separation, but during the liminal phase, a new order has not yet been reinstated by the rites of incorporation. That is to say, the rules, norms and expectations that applied to the previous social identity or status have been broken down in the rites of



separation, but those appropriate to the new identity or status have not yet been established in the rites of incorporation. The participants thus find themselves exposed to, and sometimes put to the test within, a strangely *unlimited* situation. To use a phrase that Turner would make famous, they are ‘betwixt and between’.

In *Rites of Passage*, then, van Gennep gives us an image of society, not just as a set of positions, structures, states and statuses, but also as a constant and shifting set of movements from one position, structure, state or status to another. This is the image of society summed up by the children’s rhyme about a man who went through all his rites of passage in one week: ‘Solomon Grundy: born on Monday, Christened on Tuesday, Married on Wednesday, Took ill on Thursday, Worse on Friday, Died on Saturday, Buried on Sunday. That is the end of Solomon Grundy’. ‘Life itself’, van Gennep writes, ‘means to separate and be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife – for those who believe in it.’ (1909, p. 189-90).

An important point that van Gennep makes is that the transformations at stake in rites of passage bring into play a relationship with the sacred in contrast to the profane, a relationship which is always relative: ‘Whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa. Such changes of condition do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects’ (van Gennep, 1909, p.13).

#### *Turner on liminality, anti-structure and communitas*

... ritual processes contain within themselves a liminal phase, which provides a stage (and I use this term advisedly) for unique structures of experience (Dilthey’s *Erlebnis*) in milieus detached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions, the emergence of symbolic types represented by maskers and clowns, gender reversals,

anonymity, and many other processes which I have elsewhere described as “liminal”. The *limen*, or threshold, a term I borrowed from van Gennep’s second of three stages in rites of passage, is a no-man’s-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by the society’s normative control of biological development (Turner, 1986, p.41).

Victor Turner’s development of van Gennep’s notion of liminality was clearly inspired by this dual image of society as composed, on the one hand, of relatively enduring structures, states and statuses, and, on the other hand, of the becomings or transitions that occur at the joints, interstices or cracks of structure, and through which those structures are renovated and, as it were, ‘peopled’. Turner was particularly struck by the recognition that liminal phases involve the temporary and ritual *suspension* of social structure. For him (e.g. Turner, 1969), van Gennep’s idea of a liminal situation points to a quite particular and peculiar situation in which the usual limits that apply to recognizable social identities, positions and offices - including rights and responsibilities – are temporarily removed. The suspension of these limits, when all goes well, is what allows those involved to ‘pass-through’ a transition to a new set of limits. So, for example, in liminal ceremonies a person who is soon-to-be a king may be treated like a servant, or males and females maybe treated indiscriminately, and so forth.

Turner was concerned that most social scientists pay almost exclusive attention to social structure and that this focus ignores the vitally important contribution made to wider society by the formative experiences that occur during these liminal, transitional moments in which social structure is suspended. To mark the importance of liminality he used the phrase *anti-structure*, and indeed gave his 1969 book *The Ritual Process* the subtitle *structure and anti-structure*. This emphasis on anti-structure does not denote a lingering ‘structuralism’ in Turner’s thought, since he was well aware of the immanent and processual nature of structure. Rather, it shows an awareness of the importance of those many circumstances of rupture, transition and uncertainty that are not reducible to repeatable patterns of order and without which the advent of genuine novelty would remain inexplicable. During a liminal passage, the ‘passengers’ are directly exposed to the transient nature of the social differentiations that make up the familiar subject positions of social structure.

Differences of status, of gender, of family rank and so forth are, for a short but intense time, de-differentiated into a relatively unstructured limbo.

For Turner, then, liminal situations are not just important because they function to reduce the harmful effects of disturbance to social and individual routines. They are also important because they create the conditions for an experiential confrontation with what it means to be a human being outside of and beyond the *limits* of a structurally given social position or state. If the usual position or status that one occupies provides one, metaphorically speaking, with a pair of blinkers that limit one's focus to better enable the fulfillment of one's duties, then a liminal experience involves the temporary removal of those blinkers. Such moments or episodes of exposure tend to be highly affectively charged, and for Turner, they can be enormously valuable *formative* experiences. For this reason, liminal experiences can give rise, he suggests, to a 'sentiment of humankindness'. They can help to generate a sense of equality and of the common purpose of the society taken as a whole, rather than as a collection of structural positions. Liminal 'anti-structure', in short, is for Turner the source of those experiences that allow people to recognize the generic human bonds that make social structure possible and sustainable. This insight of Turner's is clearly a development of van Gennep's observations (cited earlier) about the sacred. As Turner (1969, p. 97) puts it, 'Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office'. This gives liminal situations a decisively important psychosocial function, since in forming the character of individuals, they also serve to revitalise, rather than simply reproduce, social structure. Again in Turner's words, through liminal experiences, people are temporarily released from social structure 'only to return to structure revitalized' (1969, p. 129).

Turner uses the word *communitas* to capture this combination of valuable features associated with liminality and missed by those who concern themselves only with structure. The relatively formless flux of a liminal transition is the stuff out of which structure is formed. As he puts it, liminality is a 'realm of pure possibility where novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner, 1967, p. 97). What is decisive, however, is the dialectic involving the alternation and interweaving of liminal *communitas* and structure. *Communitas* emerges where structure is not. Without *communitas* social structure will become inflexible and corrupt. Without

social structure, *communitas* would be chaotic. We thus have an account of social order that juxtaposes two ‘alternating models of human inter-relatedness’. The first is structured, differentiated and hierarchical, and the second is a ‘relatively unstructured communion of equal individuals submitting to the authority of the elders.’

To rapidly summarise Turner’s dense arguments, we could say that liminality is a) about ‘event’ or transition rather than ‘structure’; b) it is about residual potential that has not yet been captured and externalized in concrete social structure; c) as potential, it evokes a *potency* that can revitalize or disrupt existing structural arrangements; d) it is about the vivid immediacy of the now, with all of its spontaneity; e) it is pre-personal to the extent that it cannot be reduced to existing social identities with their allocated rights and duties; f) it engenders a general sense of anonymous and shared participation in a broader unity; g) it allows a glimpse at the kind of generalized egalitarian social bond; h) it points towards an open future with no borders; and i) it is about community rather than society<sup>1</sup>.

### **Ontological liminality**

I have noted that Van Gennep and Turner were anthropologists and not philosophers, and the concept of liminality they developed was designed to be applicable to human social existence. Nevertheless, we have seen that this special focus fits neatly in the broader context of Whiteheadian ontology. A key point of communality here is to be found in the concept of *experience*. In his book *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), Turner offers an etymology of the word experience and points to its use of the Indo-European root ‘per-,’. Per- means to venture or to risk, and hence is also found in words like peril. Experience thus conjures the sense of a passing-through which is risky. Szakolczai’s (2009, p.148) observations about the relationship between liminality and experience in general also provide an important clue to an ontological account of

---

<sup>1</sup> That is to say, community, not as something that is, but as something that happens: ‘Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens’ (Martin Buber [1961], cited by Turner, [1969] 1995).

liminality<sup>2</sup>. To have ‘an experience’, he suggests, ‘means that once previous certainties are removed and one enters a delicate, uncertain, malleable state; something might happen to one that alters the very core of one’s being’. In other words, the concept of experience, thought in this way, is synonymous with the concept of liminality, since a liminal state is precisely a ‘delicate, uncertain, malleable state’. This definition of experience fits with the way Turner defines ‘an experience’ as distinct from ‘mere experience’ in his co-edited volume from 1986 *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986):

Mere experience is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events. An experience, like a rock in a Zen sand garden, stands out from the evenness of passing hours and years and forms what Dilthey called a ‘structure of experience.’ In other words, it does not have an arbitrary beginning and ending, cut out of the stream of chronological temporality, but has what Dewey called ‘an initiation and a consummation’ (Turner and Bruner, 1986: 35).

‘An experience’, then, is something that ‘stands out’ because it introduces a rupture in the fabric of ‘mere experience’. We might call ‘an experience’ an event, in the same way that historians talk about historical events as significant moments of transformation. Liminal rites, in Turner’s view, are valuable precisely because they enable and generate such experiences. If we juxtapose this insight with Whiteheadian process philosophy, we encounter an ontology in which experience (in the form of actual occasions of experience) as such is fundamental to all forms of reality.

Like Turner, Whitehead insists upon a pulse or rhythm which he calls the ‘rhythm of the creative process’. This rhythm ‘swings from the publicity of many things to the individual privacy; and it swings back from the private individual to the publicity of the objectified individual’ (Whitehead, 1929, p. 151). Process thought, then, gives a fundamental role to the process of experience, but experience conceived as a liminal *going through*. In this respect, Whitehead distinguishes two related meanings of

---

<sup>2</sup> Szakolczai (2009) also points out that the famous “first word” of Greek philosophy, *apeiron*, is equivalent to the latin *liminality* in referring to in-between moments when conventional limits are removed.

process: concrescence and transition. The first is the process through which an actual occasion converts its merely real data into determinate actuality (the actual occasion, strictly speaking, *is* that ‘converting’). The second is the process whereby the new and concrete ‘particular existent’ that is created by concrescence is taken up in turn as new data for the constitution of the next actual occasion. These are, however, two sides of a single process which allows Whitehead to simultaneously conceptualise *both* the expansion of the universe towards the infinite (where the ‘infinite’ is immanent within experience, and not an external ‘goal’) *and* the actual finite nature of the universe-awaiting-expansion.

As I put it earlier, Whitehead’s philosophy of limitation considers each and every entity as situated ‘betwixt and between’ a finite limit and limitless infinity. I stated that liminality is the passage from finite form to finite form, but also that this passage between forms of finitude exposes an entity to the formless infinity beyond itself. This was the basis for my ontological definition of liminality as a *transformation of the limits* that form any given factor in the universe. Turner’s notion of *communitas*, and van Gennep’s comments about the sacred, can be viewed in this light as precisely the exposure of a previously limited form to a de-differentiated factuality beyond those limits, and hence to the possibility of an experience precisely *of* those limits. In his last work, *Modes of Thought* Whitehead would characterize this same swinging rhythm in terms of a movement between experience and expression. In the course of an actual occasion of experience the expressed data of the world is prehended into a unity. The result is a new expression which can in turn be data for the next moment of experience which, upon its satisfaction, will itself yield an expression. Hence for Whitehead (1938, p.23) ‘Feeling... is the reception of expressions’ and ‘Expression is the diffusion, in the environment, of something initially entertained in the experience of the expressor’.

Although he is talking about the more limited domain of anthropology, Turner endorses a similar position when he describes expressions as the ‘crystallized secretions of once living human experience’ (Turner, 1982, p.17). Again, he is here influenced by Dilthey for whom, as Turner puts it, ‘experience urges towards expression’ (p. 37). Whitehead’s focus is naturally much broader, since his concept of experience is designed to be applicable to any and every actual occasion of

experience. The actual occasion is the atomic unit in Whitehead's philosophy, meaning that all reality is ultimately composed, not of brute matter, but of *occasions* in which the potentialities of the world are recurrently *actualised*. Actual occasions are the experiences which give rise, through their infinite iterations, to the patterned expressions of the external world. Actual occasions of experience are thus events of transition from actuality to actuality. Structural patterns are the result of multiple, various and recurrent events of *patterning* (actual occasions of experience) in the course of which the 'data' of the world are lent pattern through a process of feeling. Feeling is not just an accompanying 'quality' but literally a process of grasping (positive *prehension*) whereby an actual occasion/entity patterns the heterogeneous data of its actual world into a unity (including what is *not felt* since it is 'negatively prehended'). As Whitehead (1929, p.41) puts it:

Each actual entity is conceived as an act of experience arising out of data. It is a process of 'feeling' the many data... Here 'feeling' is the term used for the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity of the actual entity in question. Feelings... effect... a transition into subjectivity.

Feelings – as 'vectors' or transitions effecting concrescences - are thus liminal in the sense that they concern movement across a threshold from objectivity to subjectivity and back again. Whitehead puts this most clearly when he describes feelings as 'vectors' since 'they feel what is *there* and transform it to what is *here*.' These feelings, however, are intensive, subjective, transitive affairs, which can be experienced by others only once they have actualised into concrete expressions, and hence become part of the data of the universe (only once they have, in short, *perished*). The inert facts of structure, like bones and teeth, are simultaneously the dead products of previously living immediacies of becoming, and the data that make possible the living events of the now.

In sum, there is a direct parallel to be drawn between the *state/status/position* → *transition* → *state/status/position* pattern of anthropological liminality, and the *public expression (datum)* → *private experience (subjective transition)* → *public expression* pattern of a Whiteheadian version of ontological liminality. The pre-liminal, liminal

and post-liminal pattern of separation → transition → incorporation thus shows up as an anthropological echo of Whitehead's ontological trio of perishing → transition → concrescence, and both concern a certain 'objective immortality' whereby what is dead, and hence divested of its own becoming, is appropriated as a component in the vital immediacies of the living.

### **Conclusion: artists in ritual**

For convenience we can distinguish three broad ways in which liminality becomes relevant as an ontological concept within process thought. The first way concerns relationality. For Whitehead, things are relational in that they are ultimately defined by their relevance to other things, and by the way other things are relevant to them. This gives a decisive importance to relations 'betwixt and between' spatial things, or spatial liminality (something liminal is *both x and y*).

The second way concerns temporality. For Whitehead, things are *constituted* in and by their temporal relationship to a past that is giving rise to a future. From a process perspective, all things perish and recur (Brown, 2012, p.31), and all of nature is understood as a rhythm of arising, perishing and replacement. This gives a decisive importance to relations 'betwixt and between' times, or temporal liminality (something liminal is both *no longer* and *not yet*).

The third way, which is a combination of both, is that process thought emphasises creativity and emergence. Thought and experience can never be understood merely as representations or reflections of a pre-existing reality, since at stake is the emergence of new forms of reality. Process concerns the emergence of novelty: the 'expansion of the universe with respect to actual things is the first meaning of "process"'. This expansion occurs through the process of concrescence during which a 'particular existent' is constituted in the fluency of an actual occasion. By way of an actual occasion of experience, something *new* is added to the data that are patterned into a unity, since what is added that was missing before is precisely this element of pattern: '[T]he many become one and are increased by one' (Whitehead, 1929, p. 21).

It is now possible to see the extent to which Whitehead's philosophy is replete with liminal themes. He recurrently draws attention to the mixed, mediating spaces and times between phenomena. His key concepts tend to encourage paradoxical 'both /



and' thinking rather than discrete 'either / or' thinking. The concept of the actual occasion, for example, is both subject and object since it is defined in relation to a subject concerning itself with its objects and in so doing, creating itself and objectifying itself in the expression of a superject. In the same way, where many styles of thought would oppose teleological and efficient modes of causation, Whitehead crafts the concept of the actual occasion precisely to combine teleology with efficient causation: futural subjective aim and brute fact from the past are fused in a liminal present of *becoming*. The concept of the bifurcation of nature likewise warns against the separation of subject from object, and encourages liminal modes of thought.

A liminal philosophy of becoming like Whitehead's can accept no absolute divisions between human and animal, conscious and unconscious, living and non-living, internal and external since the starting point is an immanent unity of nature composed of a multiplicity of experiences/expressions. This is why Whitehead blurs distinctions as soon as he makes them, drawing attention to the exceptions and to the impossibility of ultimate clarity. The human body is ultimately indistinguishable from its physical environment. It is 'that region of the world which is the primary field of human expression' (Whitehead, 1938, p. 22). At the same time, our bodies are liminal in that they 'lie beyond our own individual experience... and yet are part of it' (1938, p. 21). Life is ultimately indistinguishable from non-living regions of nature, although 'Where ever there is a region of nature which is itself the primary field of the expressions issuing from each of its parts, that region is alive'. 'Life', writes Whitehead, 'lurks in the interstices of each living cell, and in the interstices of the brain' (Whitehead, 1929, p. 105-6). Or again, it is 'a characteristic of "empty space" and not of space "occupied" by any corpuscular society' (1929, p. 105). If something lives, then that means it is forever managing the permanent liminality of its own constant break down.

If humankind became artists in ritual, then this is because ritual provided a means to grasp and collectively transfigure this constant break down that is life, and to find in that transfiguration the means for a rejuvenated future: ultimately, to be reborn from death. The ritual madness of Dionysiac rites is a matter of finding rapture in the rupture of death and rebirth just as the wine of which he is also the deity is born from the crushed grape. If art in the form of tragedy was truly born from the matrix of

Dionysiac ritual, then this is because such revels permitted the reveler - transformed into a satyr – to see ‘a new vision outside himself’ (Nietzsche, 2003, p.43). This close encounter with one's own limits affords a view – no matter how blurred - from beyond. Wrapped in the bitter-sweet beauty of tragedy, the weight of life's torments is carried aloft on the wings of art.

## References

Brown, J. W. (2012) *Love and Other Emotions: On the process of feelings*. London: Karnac.

Gennep, A. Van. (1909/2004). *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge.

Greco, M. and Stenner, P. (2017) From paradox to pattern shift: Conceptualising liminal hotspots and their affective dynamics. *Theory and Psychology*, 27(2): 147-166.

Nietzsche, F. (2003) *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Pryor, F. (2004) *Britain BC: Life in Britain and Ireland before the Romans*. Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk: Harper Perennial.

Stenner, P. and Moreno, Eduardo (2013). Liminality and affectivity: the case of deceased organ donation. *Subjectivity*, 6(3), (In press).

Stenner, P. (2008) A.N. Whitehead and Subjectivity. *Subjectivity*, 22(1): 90–109.

Stenner, P. (2011). James and Whitehead: Assemblage and Systematization of a Deeply Empiricist Mosaic Philosophy. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 3(1): 101–130.

Stenner, P. (2013) Human rights between brute fact and articulated aspiration. In: Madsen, Mikael Rask and Verschraegen, Gert eds. *Making Human Rights Intelligible: Towards a Sociology of Human Rights*. Oñati International Series in Law and Society (1). Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 105–125.

Stenner, P. (2016) On standards and values: between finite actuality and infinite possibility. *Theory and Psychology*, 26 (2): 144-162.

Stenner, P. (2018) *Liminality and Experience: A transdisciplinary approach to the psychosocial*. London: Palgrave.

Szokolczai, Á. (2009) Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events. *International Political Anthropology*, 2(1):\_141–172.

Thomassen, B. (2009) The Uses and Meanings of Liminality. *International Political Anthropology*, 2(1): 5–27.

Turner, V.W. (1974) *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society*, London: Cornell University Press.

Turner, V.W. (1969/1995) *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*, Piscataway: Transaction Publishers.

Turner, V.W. (1977) Process, system, and symbol: A new anthropological synthesis. *Daedalus*, 106(3): 61–80.

Turner, V.W. and Bruner, E.M. (1986) *The Anthropology of Experience*. Illinois: The University of Illinois Press.

Van Gennep, A. (1909/1961). *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1922/1997). *The principle of relativity with applications to physical science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whitehead, A.N. (1926/2005). *Religion in the making*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1926 / 1985). *Science and the modern world*. Free Association Books: London.

Whitehead, A. N. (1929 / 1985). *Process and Reality*. The Free Press: New York.

Whitehead, A. N. (1938 / 1966). *Modes of Thought*. The Free Press: New York.